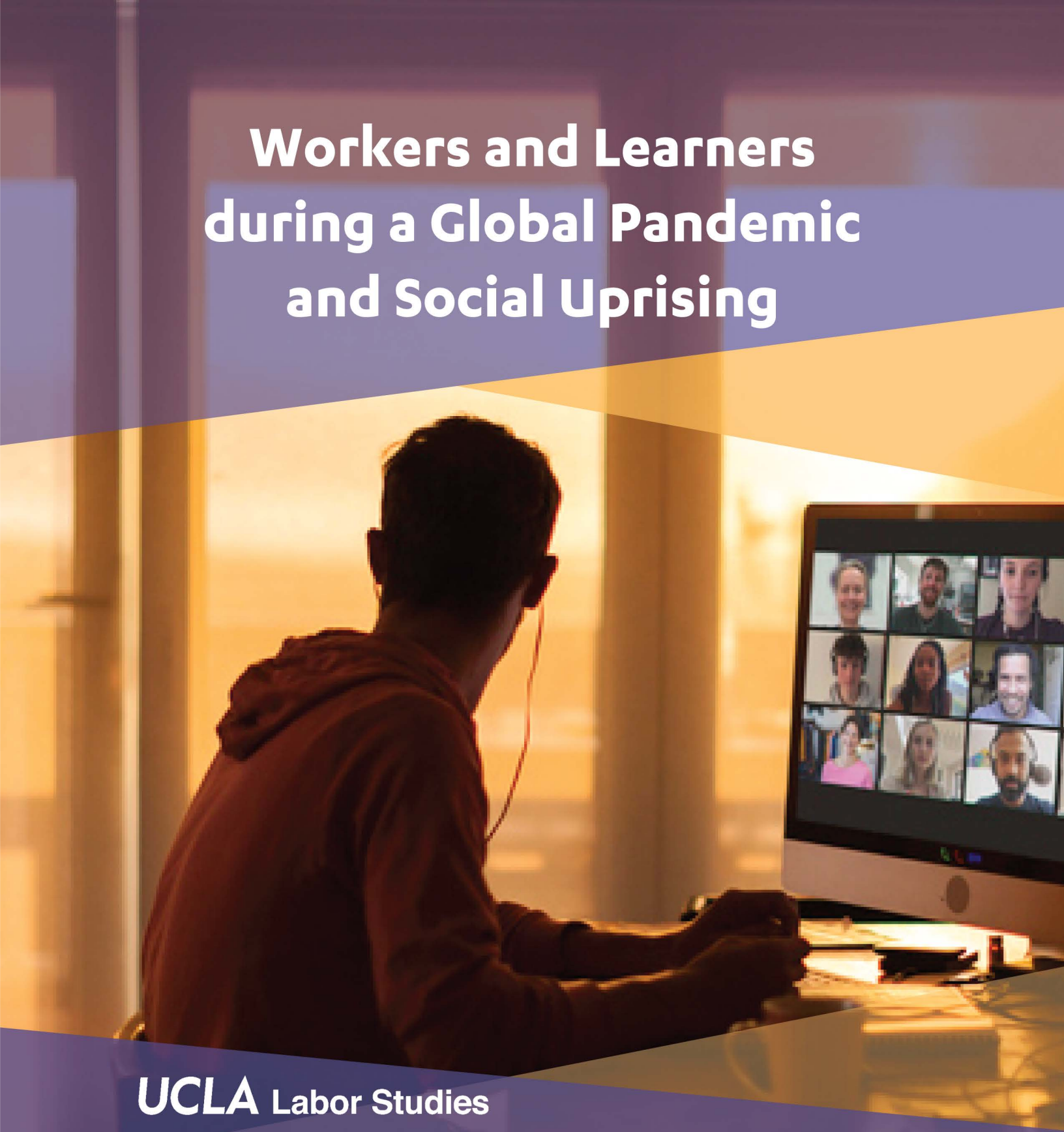
Workers and Learners during a Global Pandemic and Social Uprising



UCLA Labor Studies

UCLA Labor Center

UCLA College | Social Sciences
Institute for Research on Labor & Employment

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About Us

Workers and Learners Project

Workers and Learners is a multiyear project to document the experiences of college students who are also employed. It is a collaboration between the University of California, Los Angeles, Labor Center, Labor Studies, and Institute for Research on Labor and Employment; the Los Angeles Community College District Dolores Huerta Labor Institute, and the California State University, Long Beach, American Studies Program. This report builds off two previous studies: *Unseen Costs: The Experiences of Workers and Learners in Los Angeles County* and *A Survey of Workers and Learners during COVID-19*.

UCLA Labor Summer Research Program

The UCLA Labor Summer Research Project immerses students in real-world research on work and working-class communities in Los Angeles County. Over six weeks each summer, students learn how to conduct surveys and interviews, analyze data, and present their findings to public stakeholders. Participants have studied car wash workers, ride-hailing drivers, and the challenges facing young workers. Students' research findings contribute to a growing body of knowledge about contemporary work that informs the community, educational leaders, and other public policy stakeholders.

Labor Studies at UCLA

Labor Studies at UCLA is an interdisciplinary degree program that prepares the next generation of social-movement and civil-society leaders to lift up the prospects for California's diverse working people and their communities. In collaboration with the UCLA Labor Center and Institute for Research on Labor and Employment, Labor Studies develops students' research and leadership skills and creates opportunities to test academic knowledge in real-world settings.

UCLA Labor Center

For more than 50 years, the UCLA Labor Center has created innovative programs that offer a range of educational, research, and public service activities within the university and in the broader community, especially among low-wage and immigrant workers. The Labor Center is a vital resource for research, education, and policy development to help create jobs that are good for workers and their communities, to improve the quality of existing jobs in the low-wage economy, and to strengthen the process of immigrant integration, especially among students and youth.

Executive Summary

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, colleges have rapidly transitioned from in-person classes to remote learning, dramatically changing the way students receive instruction. At the same time, students who work are also facing unemployment or reduced hours. Most of those who were not laid off are working in frontline positions in essential services. Compounding those challenges are government policies that prohibit many college students and certain low-wage workers from accessing economic relief benefits.

This study supplements the report *Unseen Costs: The Experiences of Workers and Learners in Los Angeles County* and research brief *A Survey of Workers and Learners in Los Angeles County during COVID-19* with new data on the effects of the pandemic on this population. Based on 138 surveys and 25 interviews collected from Los Angeles public colleges and universities in August 2020, this study builds on existing knowledge concerning the experiences of workers and learners by documenting how their academic, employment, and life experiences have changed since the onset of the global health crisis.

The following are key findings from the report.

Managing School and Work

- More than half of workers and learners found it very or extremely important to have their jobs connected to their educational goals (50%) and career goals (61%).
- Half were able to balance school and work before the onset of the pandemic; afterward, only a quarter were able to balance those responsibilities.
- Nearly half (48%) changed their educational plans because of COVID-19.
- The majority (65%) are concerned about a lack of jobs available upon graduation.

Learning and Working during COVID-19

- Most (84%) workers and learners experienced some technological difficulty while attending class online.
- Two-thirds reported that their professors required students to keep their video on during class.
- More than half reported feeling high or extreme levels of stress and anxiety due to stay-home orders.
- The majority experienced a decrease in their physical activity.

Social Movements and Organizing

- Workers and learners reported increased engagement in organizing activities (61%) and in electoral politics and voting (59%).
- Workers and learners identified healthcare, income inequality, financial support and COVID-19 protections as the top issues policymakers should consider.
- Eighty-five percent of workers and learners reported that they would join a union or workers association if they had the opportunity.

Public colleges and universities, employers, and policy makers have the power to respond to the diverse needs of workers and learners so they can thrive academically and professionally. The following are specific recommendations for improving conditions.

1. **Increase workers and learners' access to twenty-first-century basic needs.** College administrators must work with local and state policymakers to ensure an expansion of scholarships and to provide universal access to the internet for remote learning.
2. **Help workers and learners navigate jobs and school during COVID-19.** Colleges must support workers and learners' academic experiences by providing professional development training for instructors on adapting curricula for the online classroom and by providing accommodations for learners who are encountering new and unexpected challenges. Employers need to create safe and just workplace environments by providing personal protective equipment, free COVID-19 testing, and hazard pay.
3. **Transform our world for workers and learners.** Unions must invest in expanding their membership to encompass the sectors occupied by workers and learners and dedicate time and energy to attending to their needs. Colleges and employers must partner to expand the opportunities learners have to develop their career readiness by offering more paid internships, work-study opportunities, and assistance with navigating the job market.

Introduction

Prior to COVID-19, half of undergraduate students in Los Angeles County were working, mostly in frontline, low-wage jobs.[1] At a time when unemployment is at record level nationwide[2] and colleges across the country are frequently modifying their reopening plans,[3] it is imperative to examine the challenges workers and learners are facing in their personal, academic, and working lives.

This brief supplements the report *Unseen Costs: The Experiences of Workers and Learners in Los Angeles County* and research brief *A Survey of Workers and Learners in Los Angeles County during COVID-19* with new data on the effects of the pandemic on this population. Based on surveys and interviews collected from undergraduate students attending Los Angeles public colleges and universities, this study builds on existing knowledge concerning the experiences of workers and learners by documenting how their academic, employment, and life experiences have changed since the onset of the global health crisis. In the last few months, there have been several reports on the effects of the pandemic on the college experience[4] but none that examine the unique and ongoing concerns of workers and learners through an intersectional lens.

It is our hope that the broader community, educators, and policy stakeholders gain a better understanding of the realities workers and learners face in Los Angeles County in the midst of a global pandemic, an upcoming national election, and worldwide protests against racism and police brutality. We invite all stakeholders to engage in discussions around the various intersections of workers who study at public colleges, universities, and vocational programs throughout Los Angeles, with the goal of improving conditions for workers and learners.

About This Study

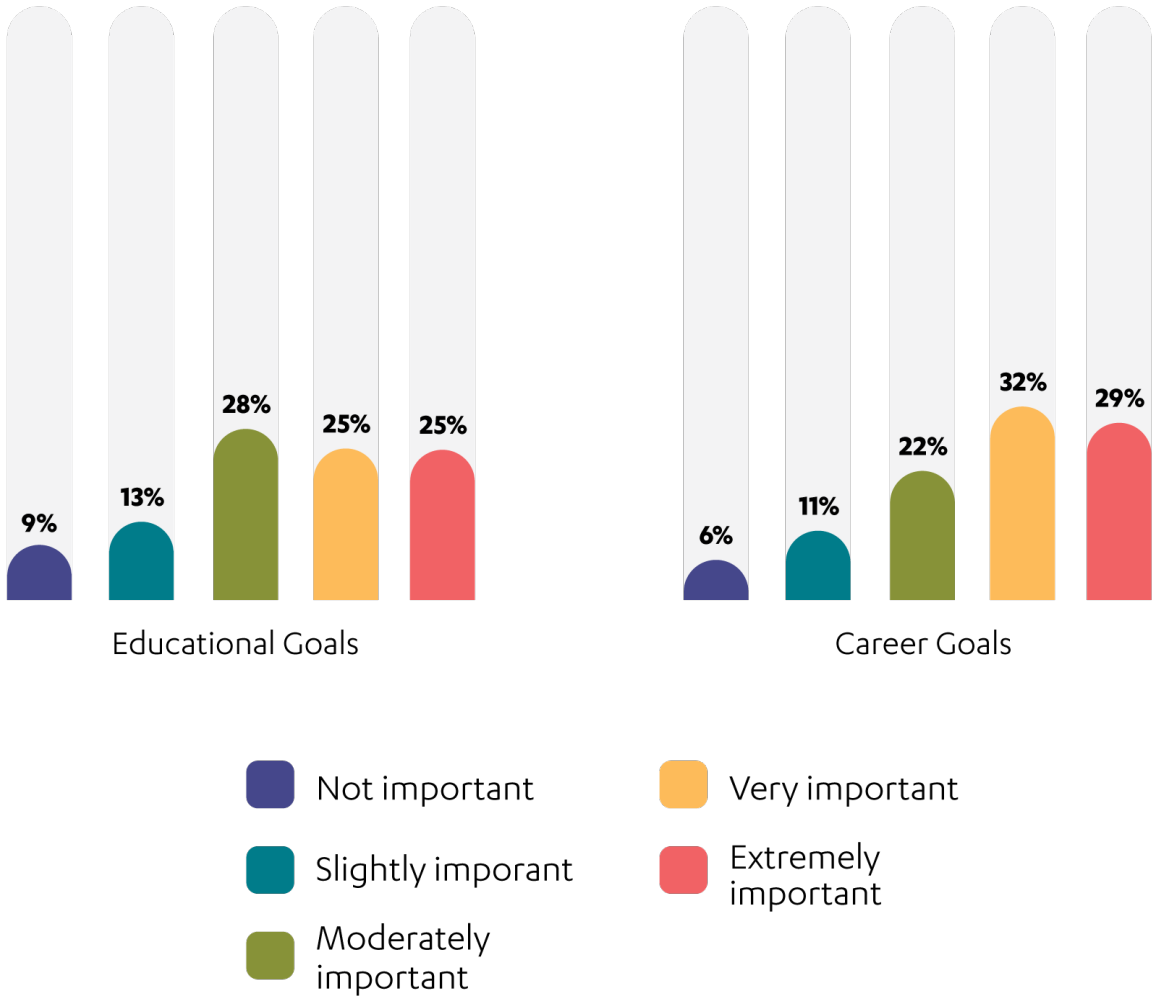
This study was conducted by a team of students in the UCLA Labor Summer Research Program, a six-week concurrent seminar and field research class. The 2020 cohort included 28 students who designed and collected surveys and interviews throughout the month of August. To qualify, participants had to have been enrolled in two consecutive terms at a public college or university in Los Angeles County and worked while attending school—even if they had stopped going to school or working since. To adhere to COVID-19 safety precautions, students recruited through their existing networks and conducted surveys and interviews via Zoom or phone. They collected a total of 138 surveys and 25 interviews. Students analyzed the data and coded interviews using Google Sheets and presented their key findings and recommendations through a public webinar. Due to the limitations of fielding during COVID-19, our sample skewed towards UCLA students, young college students, women and Latinx workers and learners.

Managing School and Work

School and Work Connections

Even though workers and learners are encountering new circumstances, they continue to value work experiences that have some connection with their educational and career plans, a finding we have highlighted in the past.[5] More than half of respondents reported that it was very or extremely important that their jobs connect to their career (61%) and education (50%) goals.

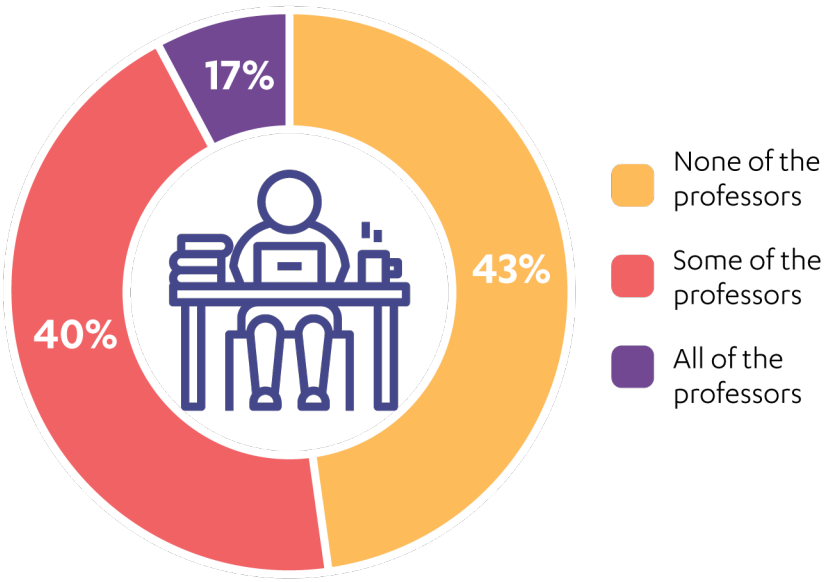
Figure 1: Importance of Job Match to Educational and Career Goals



Balancing School and Work Priorities

Workers and learners often felt that their universities did not take their employment into account. Reflecting on the last term they attended classes, 43% reported that none of their professors were accommodating when it came to students' work responsibilities, and 40% reported that only some professors were.

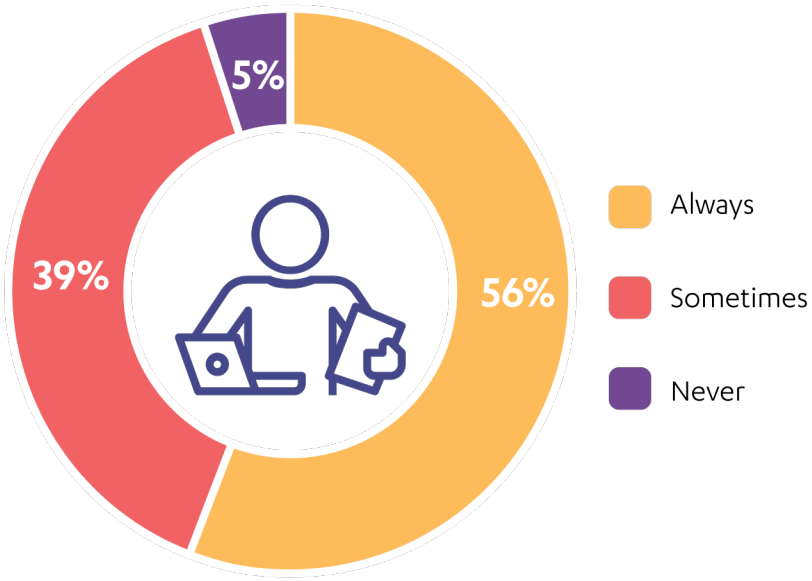
Figure 2: Percentage of Professors Who Accommodated Students' Work Responsibilities



COVID-19 has shifted the conversation to some degree, pushing universities to consider students' responsibilities outside of the classroom. One campus retail worker explained that her professors had previously set hard deadlines, without considering other responsibilities or coursework. After COVID-19, she found that "professors were understanding that people have situations at home... or situations with work, so they would extend deadlines or they would give extra office hours." [6]

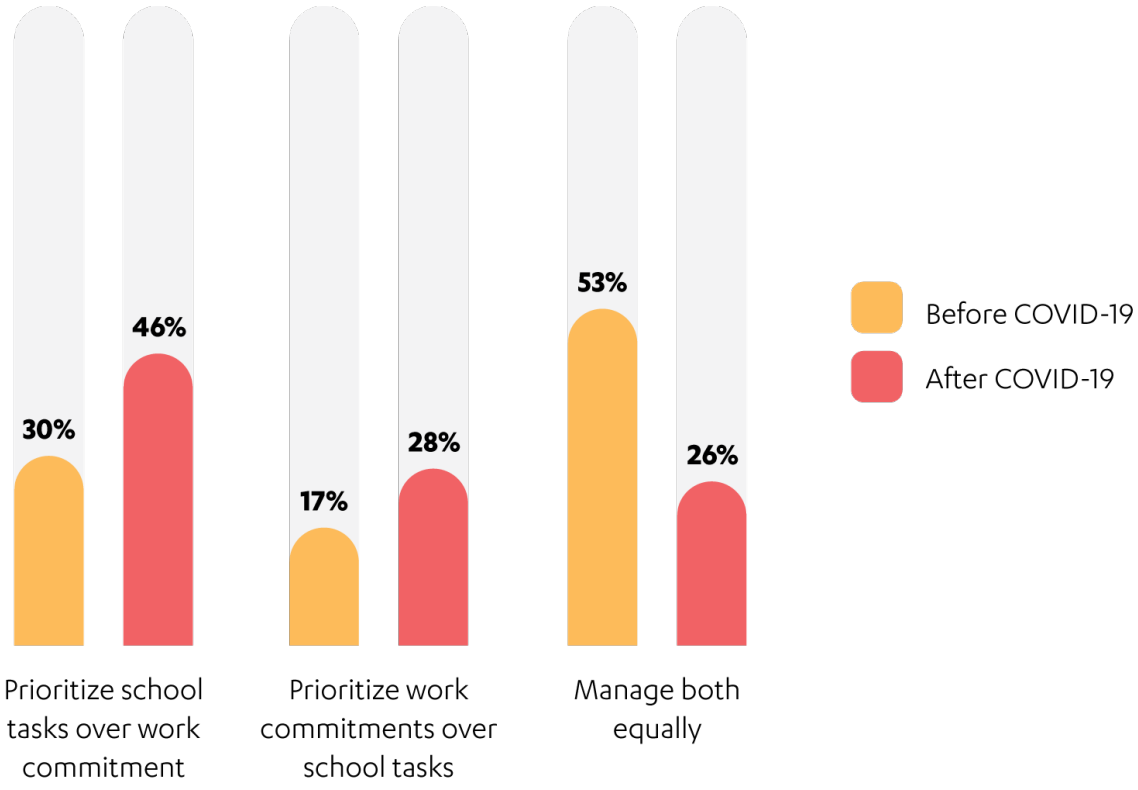
Employers were more accommodating of student needs than professors were of work responsibilities. Over half of respondents said their employers always took their student responsibilities into account when assigning tasks and schedules. A clerk at a campus department said that her supervisor would allow her to "pause" work if she needed to focus on school assignments.[7] But that was not the case for all; over a third had employers who only sometimes took student needs into account.

Figure 3: How Frequently Employers Accommodated Student Responsibilities



Before COVID-19, half the students reported being able to balance their commitments. For those who prioritized one over the other, only a third prioritized school. After COVID-19, this balance shifted dramatically; only a quarter of workers and learners were able to manage both school and work with some kind of equilibrium, and nearly half prioritized school over work.

Figure 4: Prioritization of School and Work



Juggling remote work and online schooling means balancing work and school schedules. For one political science major working as a business developer, that meant working on Fridays and weekends while attending classes during the week. Receiving class assignments on Friday entailed "working through it over the weekend or in between the days on the weekdays that I have classes." [8]

Another issue was the lack of transition time between school and work. As one public affairs major and peer mentor shared:

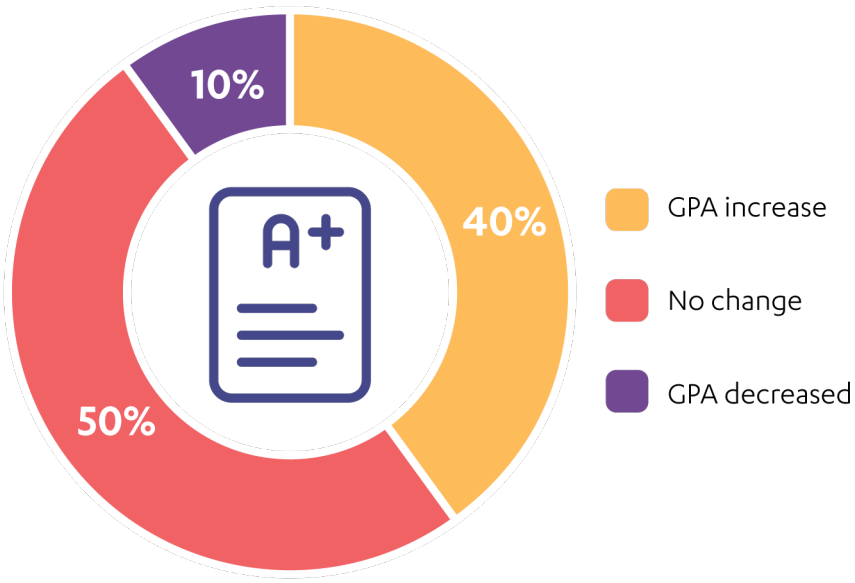
> *It has been pretty awful being in front of the screen for eight, nine hours a day. So usually what I do, I would wake up, and I would log into the server, and I would work. I would work for four to five hours, and then I would go to class the last three or four hours of my day... I don't have a desk at home. It was a whole bunch of me just sitting on my bed, laying on my back or laying on my belly doing what I had to do with Zoom or with work.*[9]

Before COVID-19, many workers and learners had to endure long commutes to work and school.[10] Working and attending school remotely has made the transition between the two easier but has also resulted in a blurring of boundaries such that home has become the locus of all aspects of life: school, work, family, and so on.

Evaluation and Grades during the Pandemic

Even with new educational, work, and life challenges related to the pandemic, during the last term, 90% of workers and learners were able to maintain or improve their grade point averages (GPAs).

Figure 5: Impact of COVID-19 on GPA



Debate about what is a fair grading system during the pandemic has been ongoing.[11] A student double majoring in political science and Chicana/o and Central American studies and working in the dining hall said the current grading system is chaotic and should be discarded:

> *I don't think people should be caring about whether they have a 3.5 or 3.8, am I going to make it into honors or Latin honors—at the same time trying to take care of themselves, their families, their friends, and still be able to function properly. I know UCLA did pass/no pass for some classes last quarter. But I think definitely [not] having a GPA system and some professors grading so hard like we were in regular class when we're not. These are not regular times.*[12]

The American Association of Community Colleges common principles, drafted in early April, recommends that grading and evaluation should "recognize the extraordinary burden placed on students during this time." [13] A political science major and double minor in labor and workplace studies and history agreed:

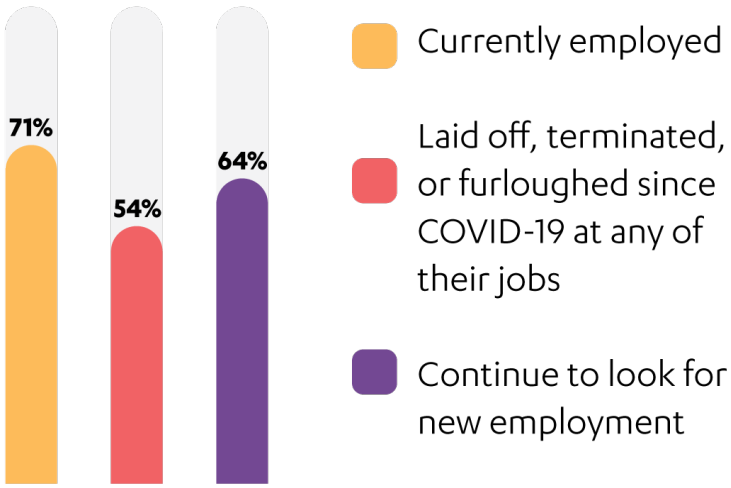
> *There's just a lot going on all the time now. A lot of stuff is hard to process and deal with. Sometimes students, something happens... It's hard to get that dealt with, especially with quarters. You can't wait a couple weeks. You have to deal with it before the quarter is over.*[14]

He noted that if universities instituted grade accommodations during this period, as they did when the pandemic first started in the spring, students would be "more relaxed about it, like with last spring quarter and finals."

Work Impacts

Most workers and learners were still employed, though over the past few months, half had experienced some type of job loss. Regardless of employment status, two-thirds were looking for other jobs more closely related to their intended careers.

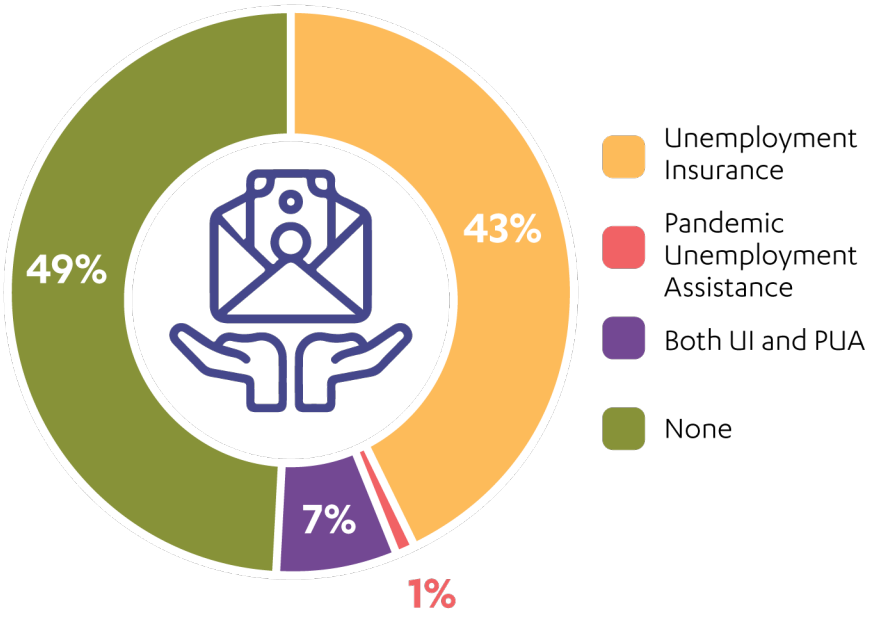
Figure 6: Employment Status



Workers and learners in a variety of sectors had experienced job loss. One daycare worker reported that while their worksite had reopened, only teachers were allowed to return, while student workers were laid off.[15] Another who worked primarily as a social media manager on campus with an off-campus job as a photographer shared that they had lost their supplementary income because COVID-19 had made it "not safe to really meet other people right now," so there were not enough clients.[16] Some who had lost their on-campus jobs opted to return home, like one worker and learner, a science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) major, from Texas.[17] Many other workers and learners, like a double major in Chicana/o and Central American studies and political science shared that they and others in their social networks lost their on-campus jobs and had to invest their time and energy in "trying to see who would want to hire a student during this time." [18]

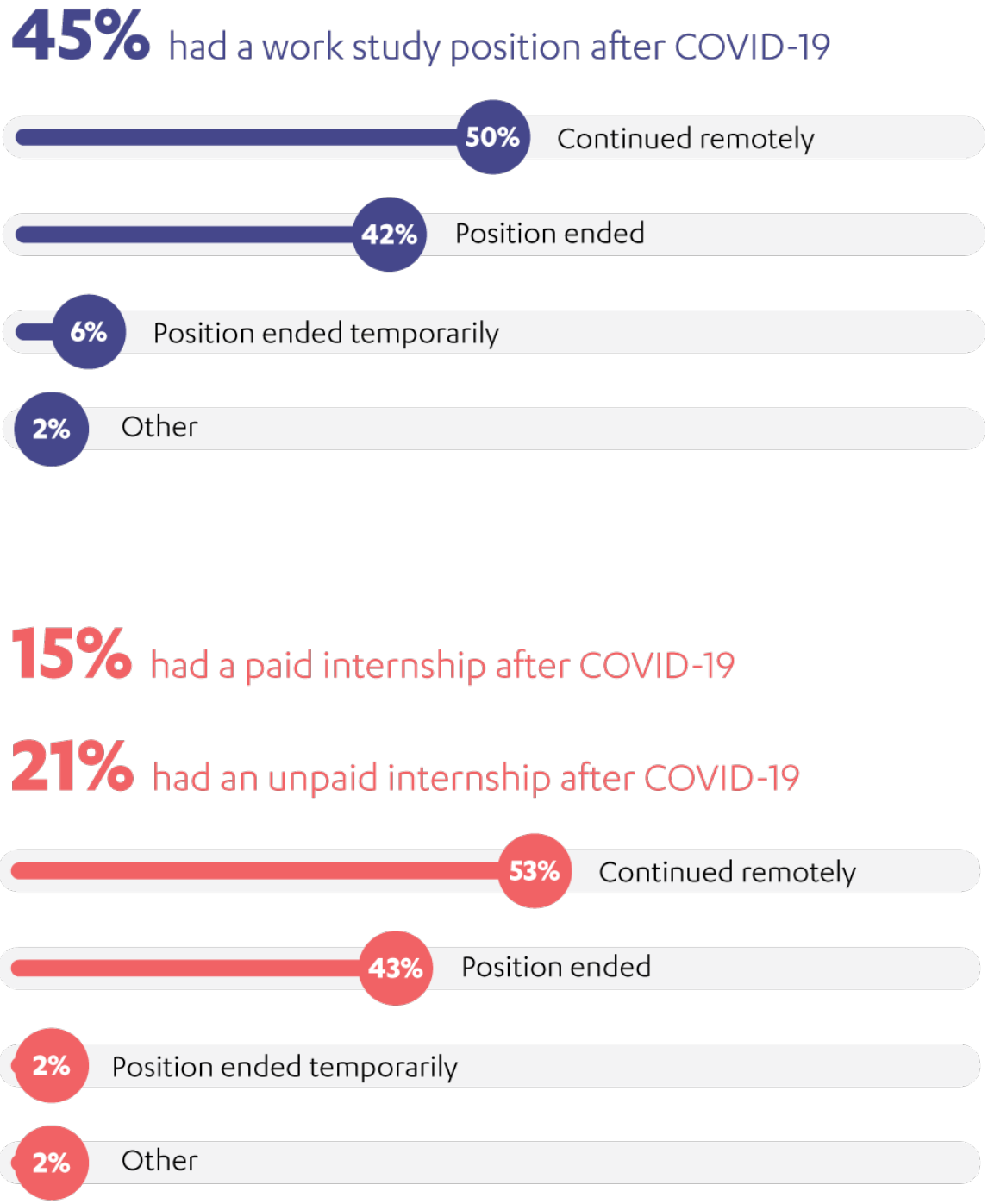
Of those who lost work during the pandemic, about half did not apply for any kind of unemployment benefit.

Figure 7: Applied for Unemployment Benefits



About half had work-study jobs, and a third had paid or unpaid internships. Many lost those positions because of COVID-19.

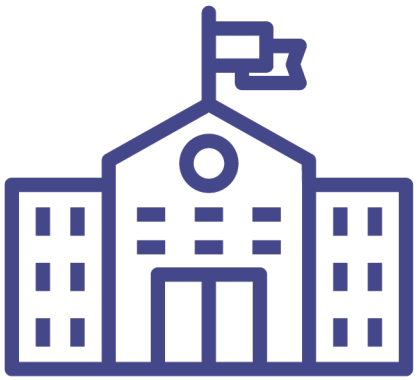
Figure 8: Internships and Work-Study Positions



Work and Educational Paths

One in two workers and learners changed their educational plans because of COVID-19.

Figure 9: Changed Plans



48%
changed education plans since COVID-19

Students delayed plans related to transferring, graduating, or applying to schools and programs. For workers and learners who had envisioned accomplishing certain educational and career goals, COVID-19 had changed their timelines, as one worker and learner majoring in Spanish and working in retail shared:

> ***I had intentions of moving out on my own after school and maybe attending grad school. And I feel like now that insecurity of just not knowing if you're going to be employed—I feel like that does affect my future in grad school. . . . Maybe if this pandemic weren't happening, maybe if I knew I would get a good job, maybe I would go to a school out of state or a school further away when I know that I can afford it.***[19]

This uncertainty was also shared by workers and learners who had yet to meet certain academic requirements. One transfer student who took time off from school to work expressed their fear of not being able to get the required courses in the upcoming term for their STEM major.[20] Situations like this put students at risk for delayed completion of their degrees.[21]

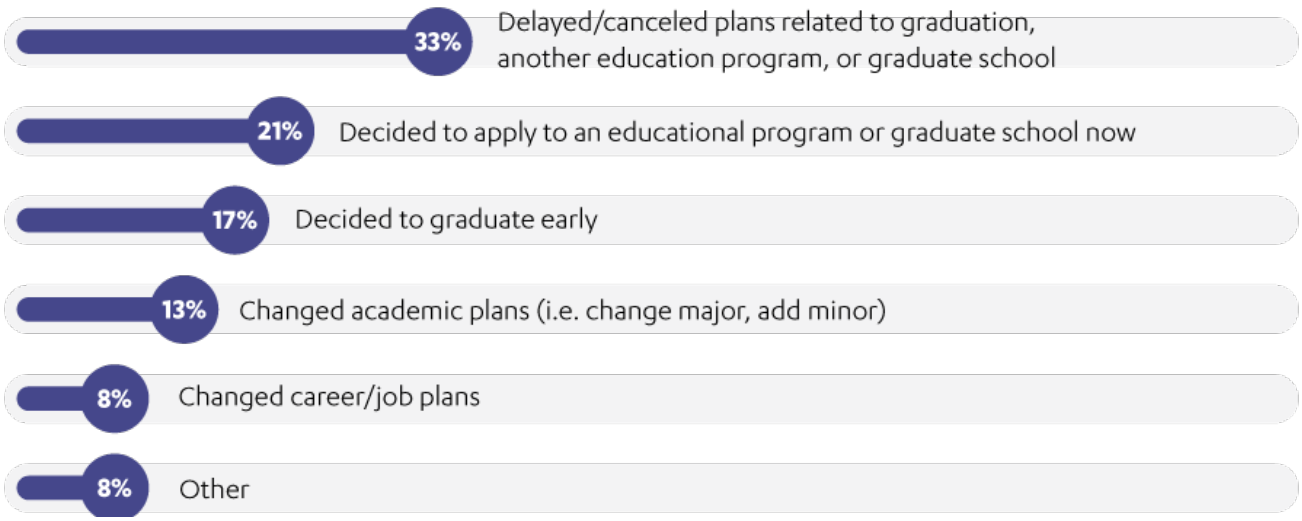
In contrast, some students decided to apply to schools sooner than they had planned. Many shared that they had opted to forgo gap years and instead apply to graduate school now. While searching for jobs to apply for after graduation, one worker and learner in Chicana/o and Central American Studies and political science noted that positions had "suddenly disappeared." Consequently, she was "thinking of directly going to grad school right after so I can find a job as a teacher or something like that." [22]

Others described changing career paths to adapt to the changes in the labor market. One double major in political science and Chicana/o and Central American studies working in dining services shared how her postgraduation plans had changed:

> *My plans were to attend law school. Because of the current pandemic, I don't think I'm going to be able to take a gap year, especially with the economy that we are having right now and the lack of jobs. So I think the best option for me right now is try to apply for grad school while I have another job and maybe pursue something in education for the moment.*[23]

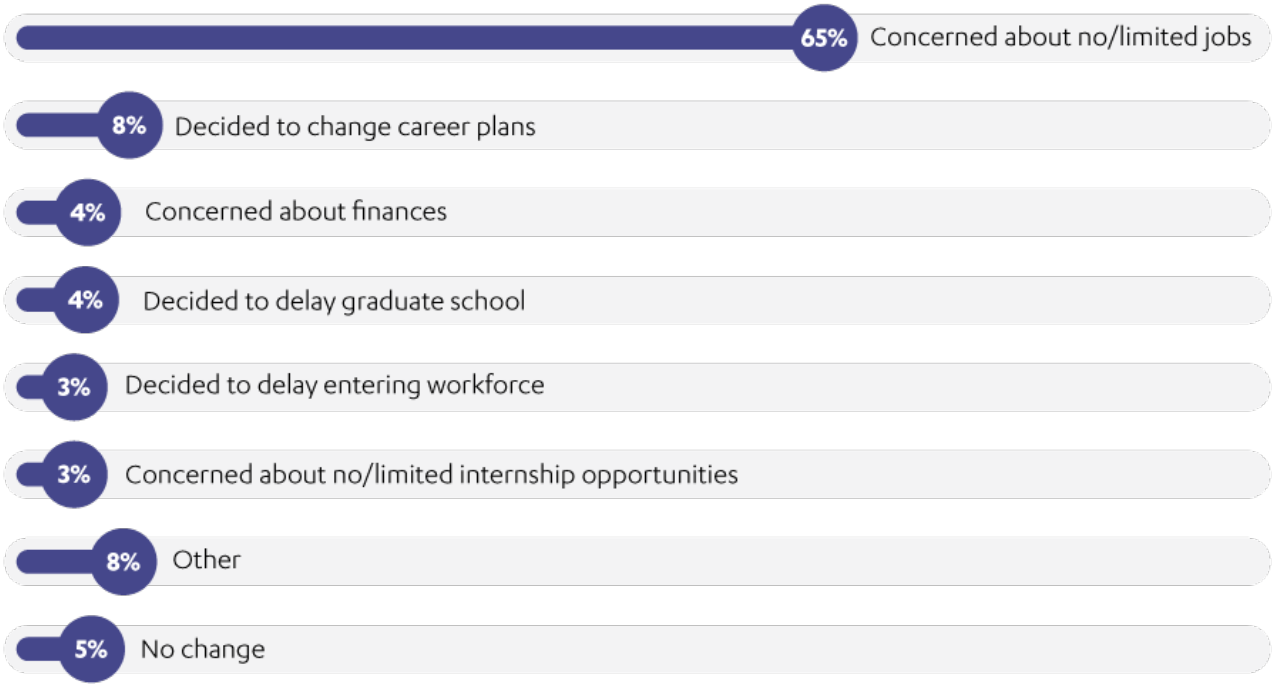
Another respondent studying applied linguistics and working as a tutor discussed that the lack of financial resources had shifted her goal from attending graduate school to become a speech pathologist to enrolling in an online program to be a pathologist assistant "because that seems a bit more reasonable." [24] An on-campus worker and STEM major explained the need to prioritize work over school: "At first I was considering going just to traditional grad school, and now I'm considering something that's shorter and is also more geared towards getting a job." [25]

Figure 10: Educational Plans



When it came to postgraduation career prospects, there was an intense level of anxiety among respondents about economic conditions. Both those who had lost their jobs and those who were still employed were most concerned about the lack of jobs or limited job opportunities. As one worker and learner reports, "I can't really apply for like internships or jobs like related to the field that I want to go into because there's no in-person work, really, happening right now." [26] These concerns are increasingly common among both recent graduates and current college students, as economic reports point to a changing job landscape.[27]

Figure 11: Impact of COVID-19 on Postgraduation Career Prospects



Learning and Working during COVID-19

Technology and Remote Learning

Nearly all workers and learners surveyed reported that their computers were adequate to handle their remote classes and assignments.

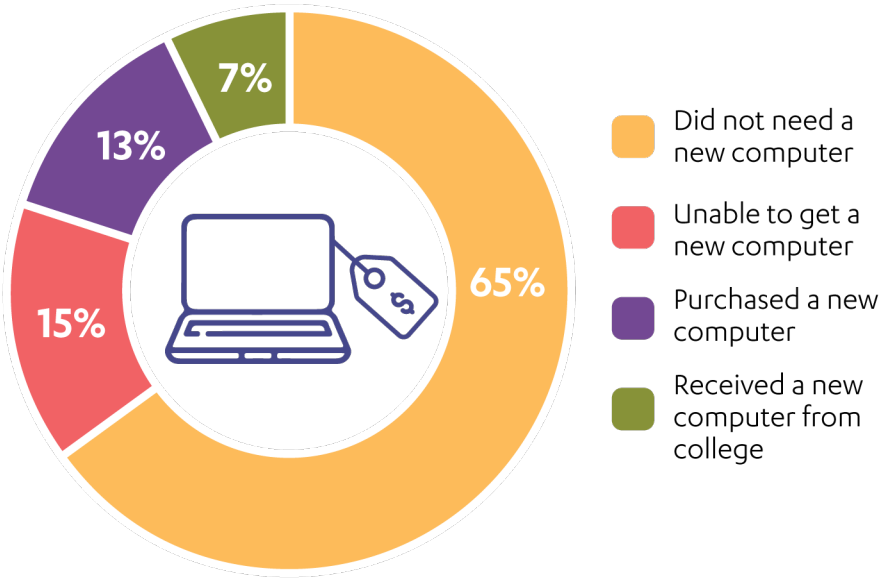
Figure 12: Technology Competency



99%
computer and other technology can handle remote education

But 15% needed a new computer and were not able to get one, and only a handful had received new computers from their colleges.

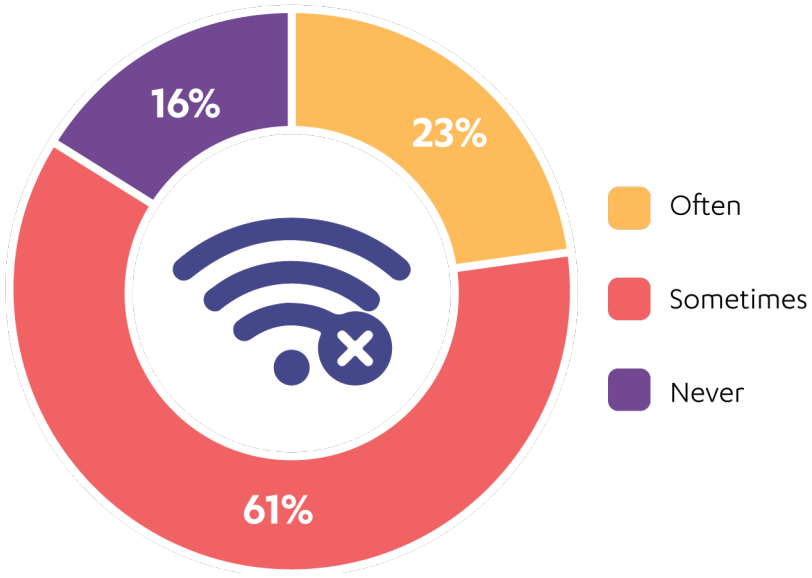
Figure 13: Computer Needs



Remote education has increased students' technology needs. News reports have documented that college students have utilized alternative methods to access the internet, like attending remote classes from their cars in campus parking lots.[28] The digital divide between those with and without technology access has been well documented for years,[29] but COVID-19 has shed new light on the problem.[30] Whether due to lack of access to infrastructure or funds to pay for service, lack of internet access is widening the educational equity gap.[31]

The majority of workers and learners experienced some kind of technological problems while attending class or doing coursework, such as losing internet access, audio problems, or computer hardware issues.

Figure 14: Experienced Technology Issues during Class or Coursework



These issues and the nature of remote learning in general is wearing on students. One STEM major working as a tutor said that their experience at school has "changed for the worse" and is "increasingly challenging" because of "Zoom fatigue and other technological issues that came up." [32] As colleges and universities have opted for virtual conferencing tools like Zoom, an increasing number of students have reported feeling burned out from attending classes and meetings online.[33]

One worker and learner described how these issues affected their level of engagement noting the difference between attending class in-class and virtually:

> ***I feel like I have no type of motivation to learn virtually. I feel like when I am in class, it's really easy to be engaged, you can see your classmates reaction to new information, it's really dynamic, there is a whole bunch of social cues that you pick up on like the little giggles or the tension and all the stuff that makes things really interesting at the university level.***[34]

Many students reported that lack of a stable internet connection has resulted in getting "kicked out" while taking exams. Some workers and learners noted that sharing a house with multiple people also affects their internet access. A STEM major working at the campus bookstore stated that "with other people in my family also needing to use the internet, the wifi is just slower in general." [35] Another STEM major working as a tutor described the same challenges:

> ***I had to start staying up later at night to do the work that I could have done during the day. This is mostly because of the internet usage in my household. We're a family of seven, and because of everyone constantly using the internet, it's slower than if it was just one person using it.***[36]

In addition to lack of access to technology, many workers and learners do not have study spaces available at home. One worker and learner felt that colleges should not only supply laptops, internet service, and other technology devices but also "provide space for those people that don't have space in their home to concentrate." The lack of work spaces, especially quiet space, compounds technological problems that already make attending classes online difficult.[38]

Privacy and Safety

Since remote learning began, debates have ensued about whether or not students should be required to keep their cameras on during class. Both students and professors have put forth a myriad of reasons for allowing students to turn off their cameras, such as protecting their privacy and recognizing that not all students have access to the bandwidth required for video streaming.[39] However, students reported that most professors required students to keep their cameras on during class.

Figure 15: Camera Mandates

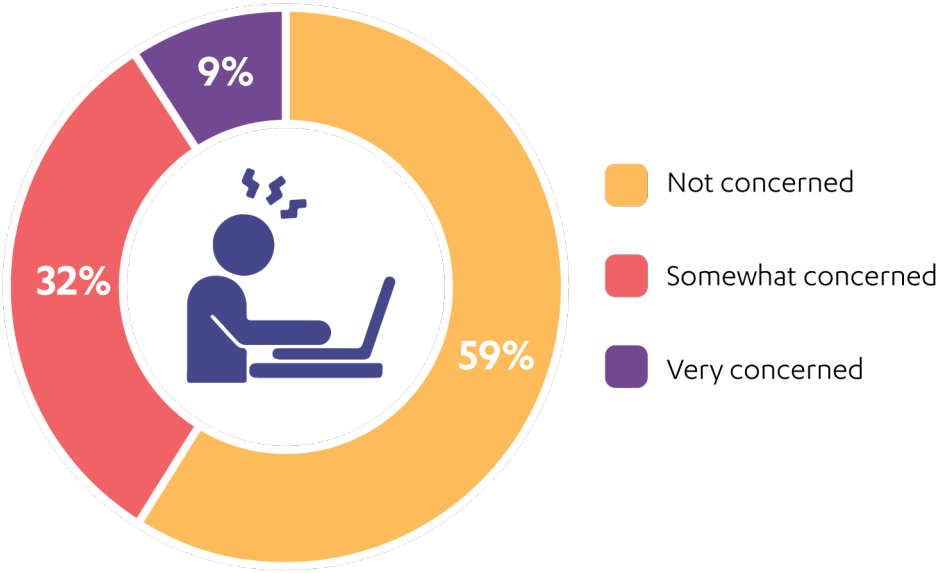


67%
of professors required students to keep the video on during class

Workers and learners shared their concerns about privacy and their discomfort with sharing their home life with strangers. One student talked about being "cautious of what I'm doing even when I turn off the camera" for fear that their camera may still be broadcasting.[40] Others discussed that they were uncomfortable displaying their homes to their peers and instructors. A Spanish major felt that instructors were "not considerate of the fact that [we] are at home." [41] One political science major stated that she was not comfortable with "people looking into my house, the background of my room, or my living room" and that this was something she would have to get used to.[42] Another STEM major working on campus felt that instructors should understand that students might not turn on their cameras because they have children or relatives in the background.[43] Finally, some workers and learners reported increased anxiety when using their webcams, like one public affairs learner and on-campus worker who worries, "Do I look okay? Do I need my camera on? Do I sound okay?" [44]

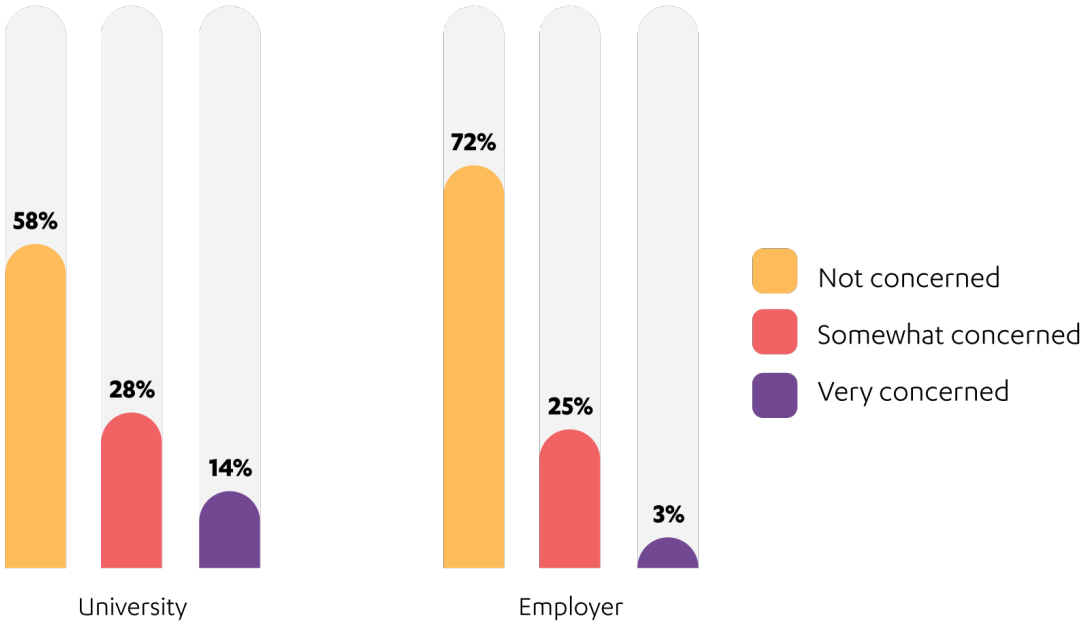
Workplace monitoring and surveillance has been increasing since COVID-19.[45] For respondents, there was less concern about their work being tracked by their employers. About a third had some concern about being tracked, and a tenth were very concerned.

Figure 16: Concern about Work Being Tracked by Employer



Workers and learners were also not too concerned about providing health information to their universities or workplaces, and some expressed seeing it as a contribution to public health and safety. One respondent explained that she would appreciate managers sharing health information about who is sick with COVID-19 given that she will have to make arrangements to get care: "My health is at risk. And if I get COVID, it's not like they're gonna care, it's on me." [46] A worker at a campus dining hall understands why people would be concerned about sharing their health information with their employers, but she believes it is "important, not just for yourself but for others too. . . . I don't think you're hurting anyone. You're just helping maintain the situation under control as much as possible." [47]

Figure 17: Concern about Providing Health Information



At the workplace, half of workers and learners noted that their employers were monitoring their health. One worker described how their workplace surveyed employees about their symptoms. She explained that some of her peers were skeptical about this but "I think it is important, not just for yourself but for others too. Actually be honest about how you feel because you could put yourself at risk even more and you could put others at risk. By filling a survey I don't think you're hurting anyone, you're just helping maintain the situation under control as much as possible." [48]

Figure 18: Workplace Monitoring of Health

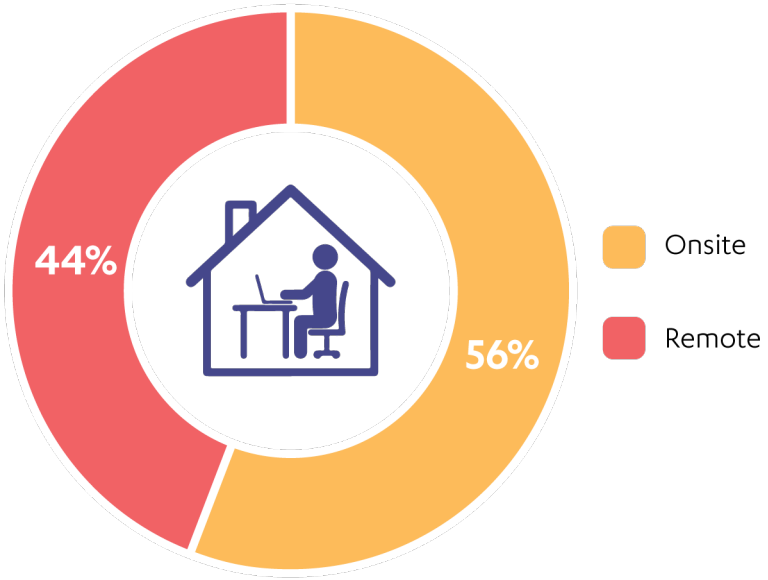


48%

of workers and learners had employers that monitored their health

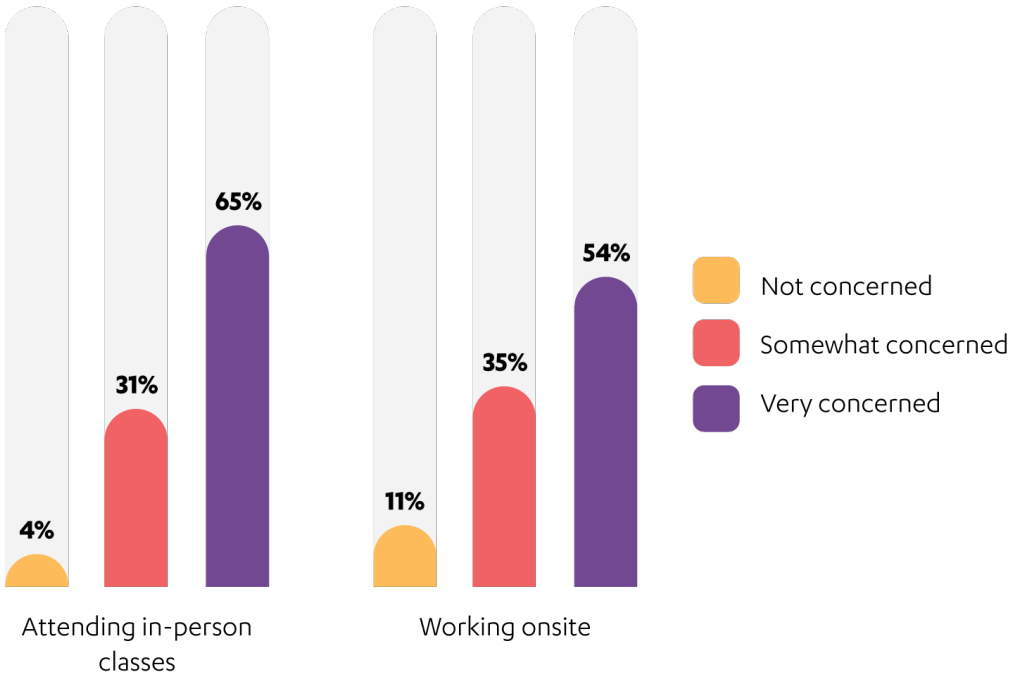
In addition to remote learning, about half of respondents also work remotely.

Figure 19: Work Location



As stressful as remote education and working is, fear about returning to in-person instruction or workplaces in the midst of a public health crisis is even greater. Since the summer, universities have repeatedly revised their plans to reopen for the fall. In July, reports estimated that more than 6,000 COVID-19 cases were linked to US colleges.[49] While some universities moved forward with their plans for in-person classes, by August, several abandoned their plans and returned to remote learning.[50] And the number of universities that have repeatedly revised their plans to reopen keeps increasing.[51] The majority of workers and learners are somewhat or very concerned about returning to in-person classrooms or workplaces.

Figure 20: Concerns about Onsite Classes and Workplace

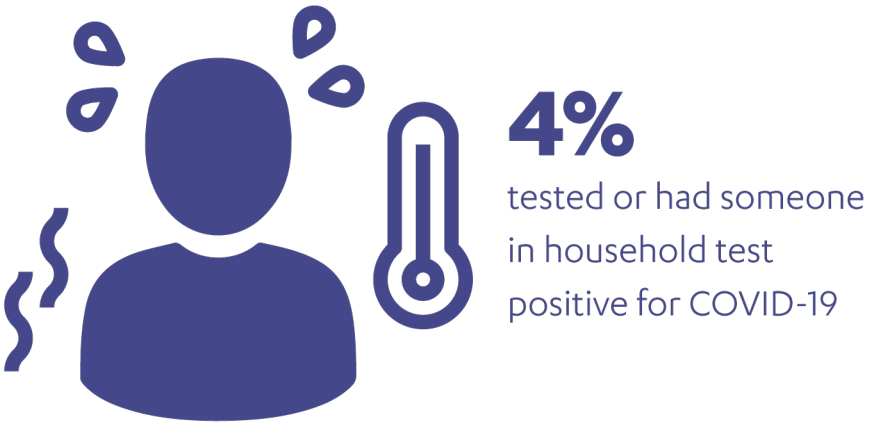


Health and Financial Well-Being

Mental and Physical Health

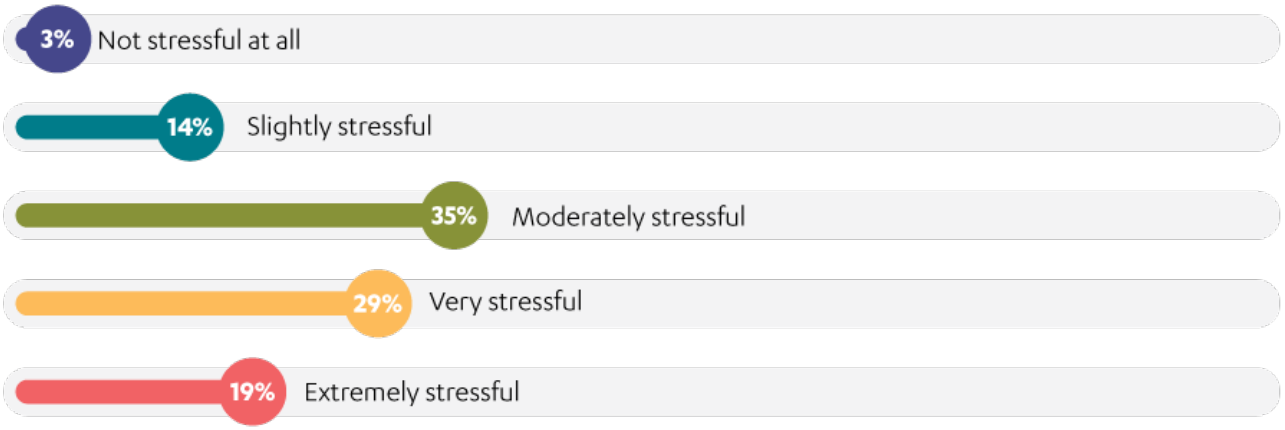
All the adjustments due to COVID-19 is taking a toll on mental health and physical well-being. The greatest concern for people is exposure to the virus. A few workers and learners had tested or had someone in their household test positive for COVID-19.

Figure 21: COVID-19 Positive



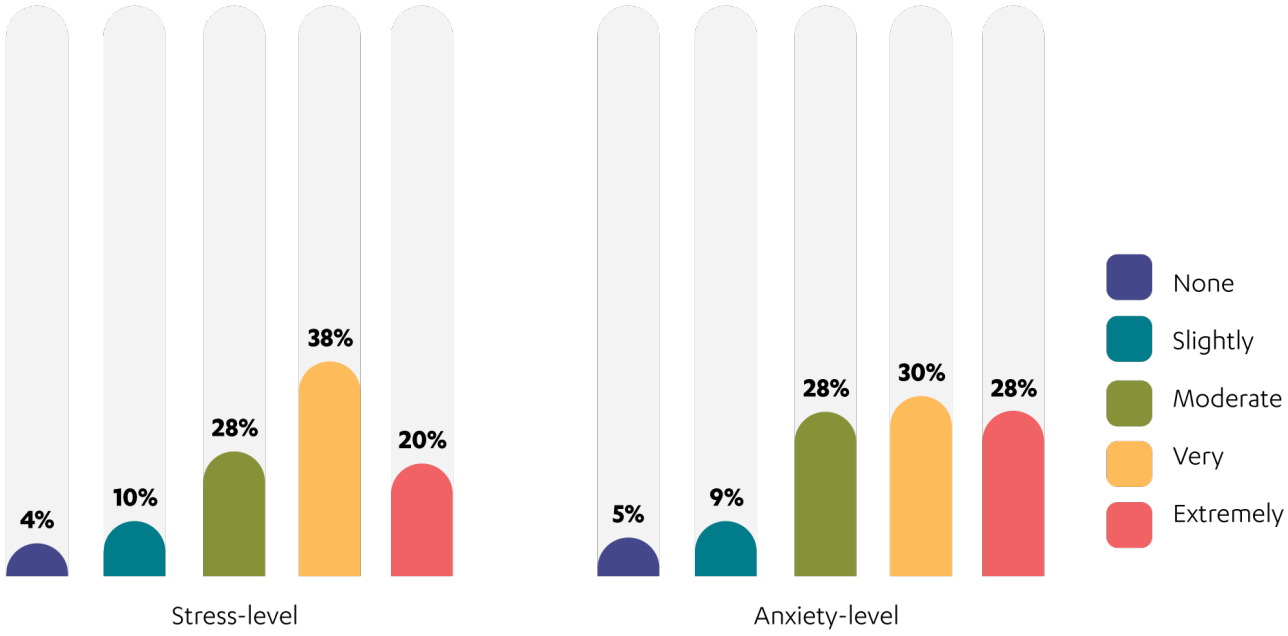
Overall, online learning caused moderate to extreme stress for most workers and learners.

Figure 22: Stress Attending Online Classes



More than half of workers and learners also felt very or extremely stressed and anxious related to stay-home orders.

Figure 23: Stress and Anxiety due to Shelter-in-Place



Some mentioned feeling trapped, while others described general anxiety and moodiness:

> ***My anxiety was through the roof. I was always moody and also I didn't know what else to do because I was so busy in the regular school year with everything. When I had nothing to do, I was really anxious all the time and stressed. I just wanted to sleep the whole time and I was always in a bad mood. So it definitely took a really hard toll on me, and I did not enjoy that.***[53]

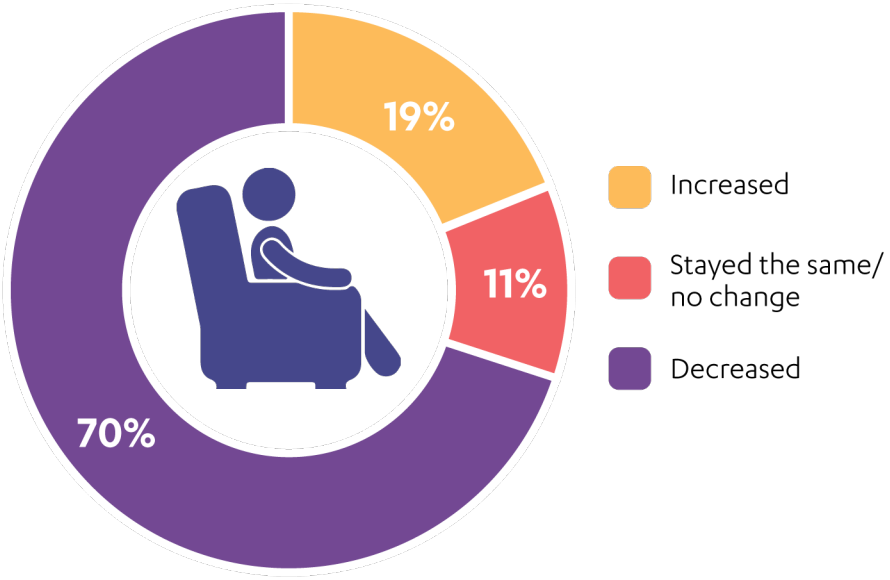
Others said that their mental health had suffered. One social sciences double major and on-campus worker explained that it was all just too much, with the "transition of housing, school, and work, all of them combined, and a pandemic." [54] Another worker and learner described how being at home negatively impacted their mental health:

> ***When we're at home, the whole time, you just got a lot of time to think, think, think, and think, and you usually think the worst about yourself and all that. But I try to not let the negative thoughts get to me.***[55]

This experience was shared by another learner double majoring in public affairs and labor studies working as a legal assistant who lost a family member to COVID-19. She described being forced to stay home as "not having anything to do and still needing to focus on school [while] dealing with [a death] and not being able to go and distract myself with anything." This trend of increasing feelings of anxiety and depression seem to be one of the many negative impacts of COVID-19.[56]

The pandemic is also impacting physical activity. With gyms, recreation centers, and studios closed, workers and learners noted how challenging it has been to remain active.

Figure 24: Physical Activity



Some workers and learners noted that their physical activity has decreased not only because gyms are closed but also because they no longer walk to school, to work, or around campus:

> ***I'm used to getting around, walking around campus and everything. Now I've just been in bed the whole time. So a typical day is just me waking up, me getting out of bed to wash up, me eating, and then me just coming back to get right back into bed.***[57]

Another worker and learner who worked on campus described life before COVID-19 as one where they "would walk campus, go up hills, and just walk so many times in a day." [58] The majority had tried a variety of ways to cope with the decreased physical activity. One learner who worked as a caregiver expressed his frustration with how COVID-19 impacted his physical fitness:

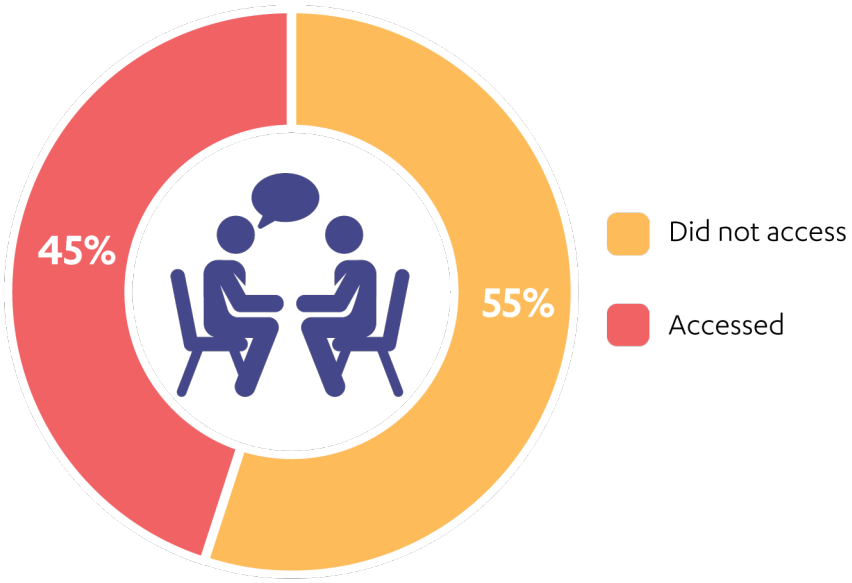
> ***I was in my prime shape that I had ever been in my life like a week before COVID happened. And then when COVID happened, overnight they canceled school, they canceled the gym, they canceled Brazilian jiu-jitsu, they canceled the marathon. I lost all motivation to work out and all resources to work out. I was still trying, but it wasn't the same. So it turned into a maintenance thing. And then I started losing muscle, and it became a lot easier to not care about my diet because I wasn't caring about my exercise as hard. And so my diet and my exercise routine plummeted, and I mean it came back up eventually, but it's not the same. I'm still playing catch up in a sense. I'm still trying to go back to where I was.***[59]

Another worker and learner found it hard to go out because of safety concerns. She explained, "I was a lot less motivated to leave the house. It was hard for me sometimes to be like, Oh, let me go for a walk for me, because, obviously we want to keep that distance and you don't really want to be out and about." [60] But by not going out, she described feeling down, stir-crazy, and unfocused.

With the lack of opportunities to move, some workers and learners began to engage in alternative activities like practicing yoga at home, going on walks or playing sports in the neighborhood, or working out at home. As one worker and learner shared, "I'm trying to exercise at home and eat nutritious food for my own well-being to survive the pandemic." [61] All workers and learners shared the sentiment that if they could take care of themselves physically and mentally, they would be able to better manage living through a pandemic.

Despite all these pressures, half of workers and learners had not accessed their campus mental health resources and support services.

Figure 25: Campus Mental Health Resources and Support Services



Some discussed that accessing university mental health resources was pointless because of long wait times. After one worker and learner ended up on a long wait list to see a therapist for a follow-up appointment, she resorted to private resources for help.[62] Many elected to attend to their mental health using alternative methods, like mobile apps dedicated to mindfulness practice. Others began to meditate on their own, with some coupling that with yoga.

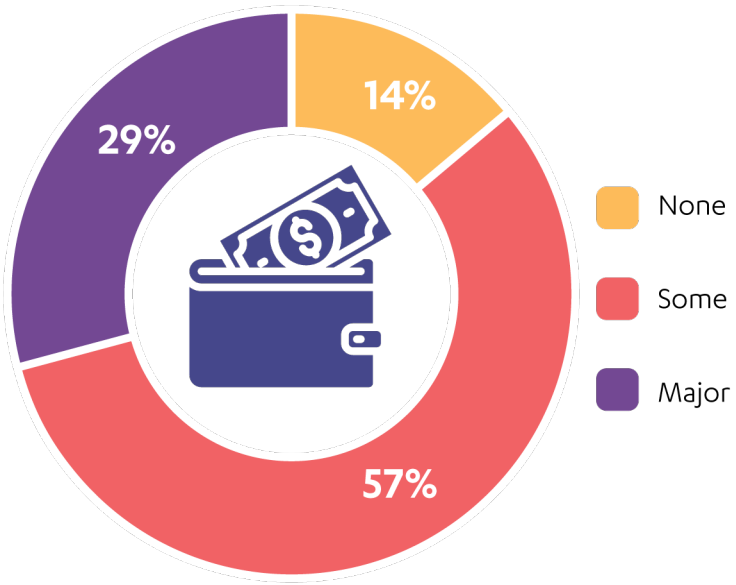
Other workers and learners have relied on their personal networks. One mentioned that their coworkers would check in on each other, stating that "it was nice to feel like you are not alone—facing it together." [63] Another was able to utilize resources from their community to get in touch with a social worker, stating that "it was something that I had to do" after not being able to access university resources.[64] Yet others relied on their friends and families as their support systems or on their spiritual practices to cope with the mental toll COVID-19 had taken on them. One business major working in food service relied on several coping mechanisms to address their mental and physical health:

> *I found podcasts. I've been meditating a lot actually. And I come from a very spiritual family, not a religious family, so those values were already ingrained in me. I have been practicing it a lot more. Also, I found that during this time where I am really stretching myself thin is when I should be pampering and taking care of myself extra. I did get myself a therapist. I've started seeing a therapist to deal with stress and coping with anxiety. The overall self-care package I feel like has come into play a lot more.*[65]

Financing Education

Workers and learners continue to experience concerns about financing their education, which includes not only tuition but also the associated living expenses. Nearly all (86%) have some or major concerns about financing education. Workers and learners had this concern before COVID-19; our previous survey found 74% had some or major concerns, but that has increased.[66]

Figure 26: Level of Concern about Ability to Finance Education



Compounding the stress about financing their education, workers and learners have encountered obstacles when trying to make contact with financial aid officers. One STEM learner explained how frustrating her experience has been now that they can only contact financial aid over email; there is no immediate response, which adds to the turmoil.[67] Several others said their financial aid was cut because their universities switched their status from off-campus to commuter students. A STEM major working as a tutor described how their financial aid has changed:

> *I think financial aid got worse. It has gotten a lot worse. I saw that they took off three of my grants that I was previously getting. They took it off because they were considering me as a commuter even though I am going to live off campus. I deserve off-campus financial aid instead of commuter financial aid, which really negatively impacted my financial security for this upcoming school year—another thing that's also putting additional pressure on my work study and my employment. I am a full-time student and a part-time worker, but now it's making me feel like I need to go and look for another job or something to assist me and allow me to have financial security for the upcoming school year.*[68]

Not only has financial aid been impacted for the 2020–2021 academic year, but workers and learners also struggled to access work-study funds over the summer. One research assistant said she was told by her employer that she would be unable to continue working because "financial aid didn't process work study with packages for summer sessions." Instead, she had to apply for unemployment and used those funds to help pay rent.[69]

For many, lack of financial resources means that their housing is jeopardized. One learner studying applied linguistics reported that she picked up extra hours to guarantee enough income to pay rent. She expressed her concerns about the response from her institution to financially support her:

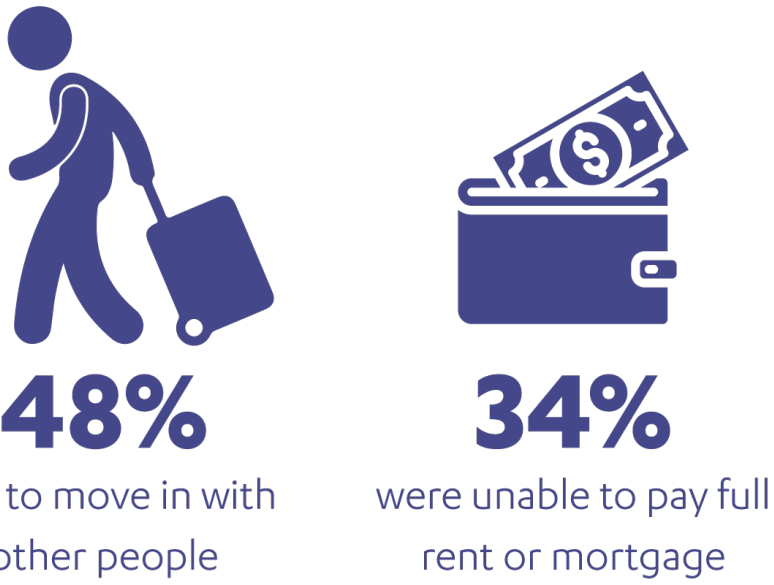
> ***I was worried obviously. The financial aid administration wasn't giving us anything or telling us anything if they were going to give us money. That's one thing that I was really worried about at the start of COVID, having to pay for the future or the rest of the month's rent.***[70]

Reflecting on her financial situation, she stated that she perhaps should have taken out loans "to be financially stable and to pay for extra necessities [like] a new laptop." Another worker and learner went on unemployment to save money for rent and other living expenses for the new academic year.

Food and Housing Insecurity

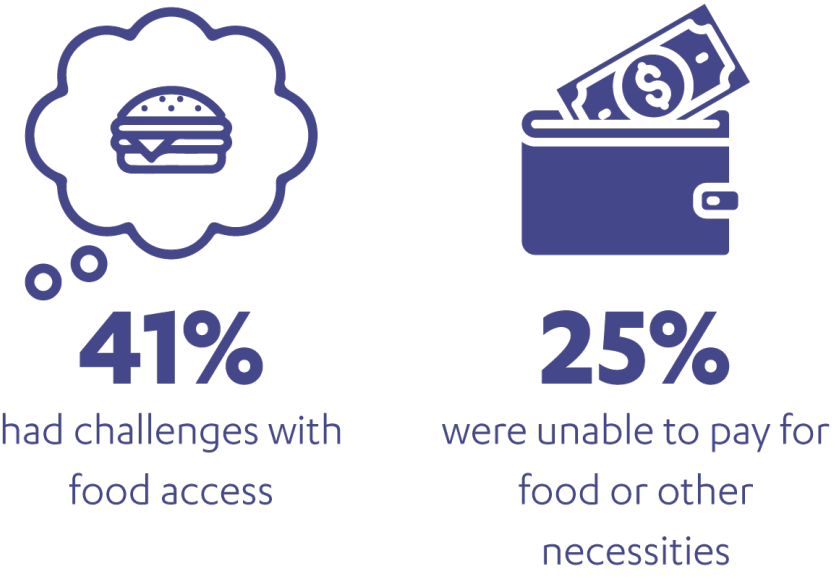
Workers and learners also face challenges around housing and food access. About half had to move since COVID-19, and a third were unable to pay for housing.

Figure 27: Housing Challenges



Workers and learners reported challenges around food access, such as having to skip meals, lack of access to nutritious meals, or disrupted eating patterns. A quarter were unable to pay for food and other necessities.

Figure 28: Food Insecurities



Some workers and learners shared that they had to rely on CalFresh benefits[71] to access food. One on-campus worker doing a double major discussed how she addressed food insecurity:

> ***At times, my roommate and I would actually share food, share groceries, buy each other groceries, to make sure we would have something to eat. In terms of accessibility, CalFresh was there [as well as] getting assistance from my roommates. So, there wasn't too much food insecurity.***[72]

A few mentioned that their university provided gift cards to buy groceries at local supermarkets, though they noted that they only found out about this through social media as opposed to email from their institutions. Some workers and learners explained they could not rely on their families for food because of their financial situations. One learner working at the campus dining hall shared that, in fact, they provided food for their family:

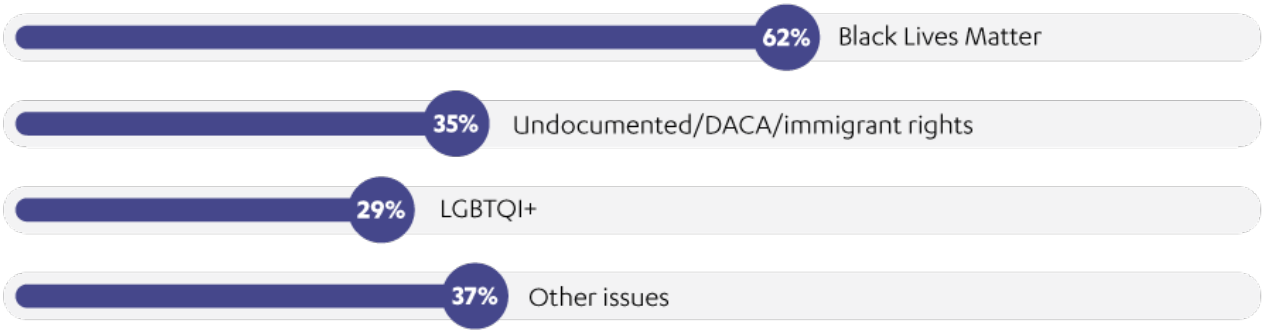
> ***With the job that I have, I don't make a lot, but that covers the bills, my food, and everything that I need to pay. Even sometimes I try to help my mom. I was definitely really worried how I was going to be able to afford food. . . . It was really overwhelming and really stressful because I needed to ration money and make sure I have enough money for rent but also enough to pay my gas bill and electricity bill.***[73]

Social Movements and Organizing

Social Movements and Uprisings

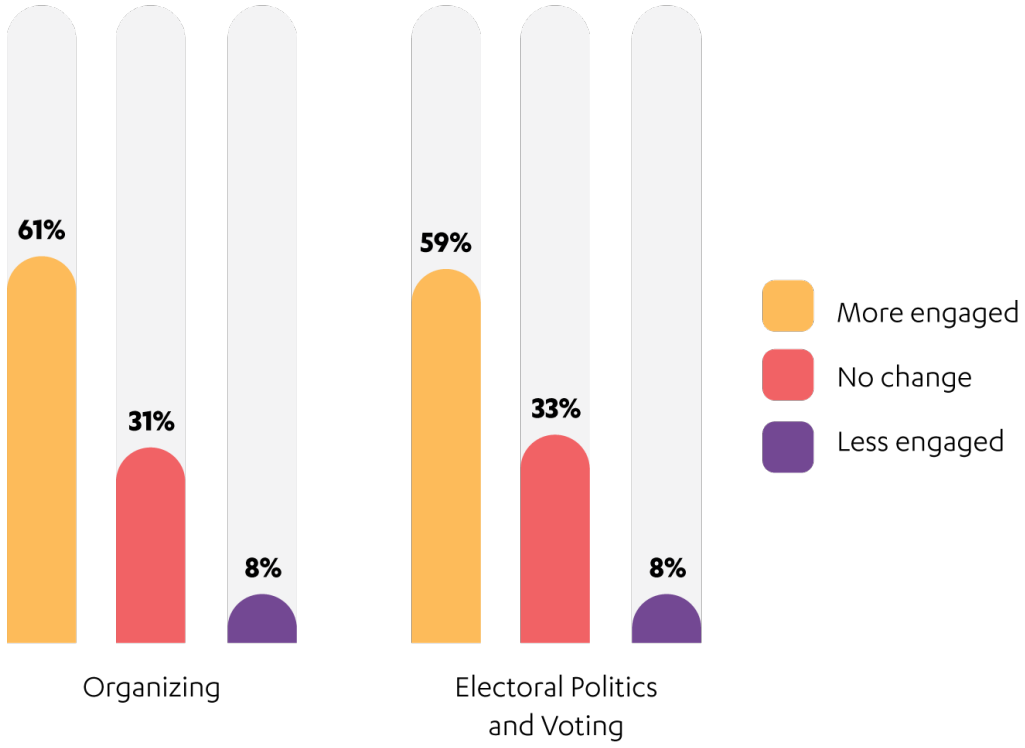
In the midst of the global pandemic, many workers and learners were active in a number of causes. Los Angeles saw the rise of public protests caused by police brutality cases, such as the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor.

Figure 29: Participated in Protests Related to These Issues



Workers and learners have stepped into this moment of social change. The majority had increased their engagement both in organizing and electoral politics since COVID-19.

Figure 30: Engagement Level in Organizing and Electoral Politics



Workers and learners identified a range of issues that need to be addressed to improve their health and well-being, such as access to health care, income inequality, financial support, and protections related to COVID-19.

Figure 31: Issues Policymakers Should Consider That Impact Workers and Learners



Unions and Worker Centers

Nine percent of respondents were members of unions. The most recent percentage for union membership in California for all age groups was 15%.[74] Generally, young people have lower union rates. In 2017, 8% of young people were in unions.[75]

Figure 32: Work Organization Membership

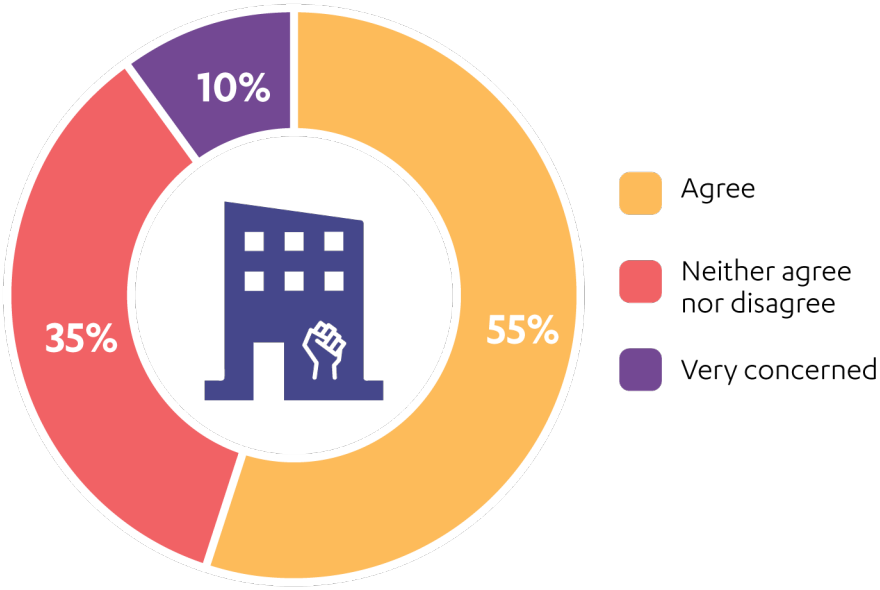


9%

are a member of a union or worker center

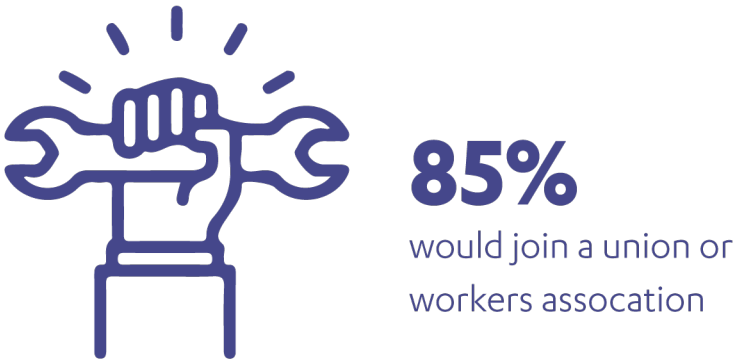
Since COVID-19, the country has seen a resurgence of unions that have led policy and organizing efforts to protect frontline, essential workers.[76] About half of respondents believed that unions were providing workers with protections during COVID-19, such as fighting for hazard pay and personal protective equipment.

Figure 33: Unions Secured Worker Protections during COVID-19



Even before the pandemic, some of the largest gains in union membership were attributable to young people.[77] The vast majority of those surveyed reported that they would join a union or worker center if they had the opportunity. In 2015, when retail and restaurant young workers were asked the same question, 59% said they would join a union.[78]

Figure 34: Joining a Union



Workers and learners identified several issues they would like to see unions support. Most pressing was continuing the fight for COVID-19 protections. Following that were issues such as wages and job security. Some workers and learners also identified increased organizing and education efforts and representing workers and learners.

Figure 35: Issues Unions Should Support for Workers and Learners



Workers and learners shared positive views about unions' role in creating safe work environments. One on-campus worker studying social sciences felt that unions provide protection and support in the workplace.[79] Others noted the importance of unions specifically during the pandemic. A worker and learner who worked as an office assistant stated that unions have been able to secure compensation for essential workers and helped create safe workplaces.[80] COVID-19 has shed light not only on the benefits of being a union member but also on the need for unionization on a larger scale to address structural problems, as one respondent who works as a legal assistant observed:

> *I think COVID-19 has exposed a lot of cracks in the market and in the system as a whole. I think it's important for us all to look into the fallibility of employment in America, especially when most people aren't represented by unions or anything of that nature, as well as the way in which our benefits are tied to employment a lot of the time, like medical benefits and things like that. So, I think that, in my view, it's really exposed the failings of the system and the way in which employees often are not protected by their employers and the lack of understanding in a capitalistic system.*[81]

Recommendations

Though living at the intersection of multiple issues and identities that create the need for benefits and resources, workers and learners often fall outside of the frame to qualify for those benefits. Prioritizing issues that benefit workers and learners is an investment in our future social and economic prosperity. The following are specific recommendations for improving conditions.

1. **Increase workers and learners' access to twenty-first-century basic needs.**

   Workers and learners continue to voice their need for financial resources, housing and food support, health care, including mental health resources, and technological tools. College administrators must work with local and state policymakers to ensure an expansion of scholarships and to provide universal access to the internet for remote learning.

2. **Help workers and learners navigate jobs and school during COVID-19.**

   Colleges must support workers and learners' academic experiences by providing professional development training for instructors on adapting curricula for the online classroom and by providing accommodations (technological, grading, assignment) for learners who are encountering new and unexpected challenges. Employers need to create safe and just workplace environments by providing personal protective equipment, free COVID-19 testing, and hazard pay.

3. **Transform our world for workers and learners.**

   At a time when communities have come together to demand social change, institutions must address workers and learners' needs and experiences. Unions must invest in expanding their membership to encompass the nonunionized sectors occupied primarily by workers and learners and dedicate time and energy to attending to their needs. Colleges and employers must partner to expand the opportunities learners have to develop their career readiness by offering more paid internships, work-study opportunities, and assistance with navigating the job market.

Appendix A: Background on Survey Respondents

Table A1: Number of Surveys Collected by College System

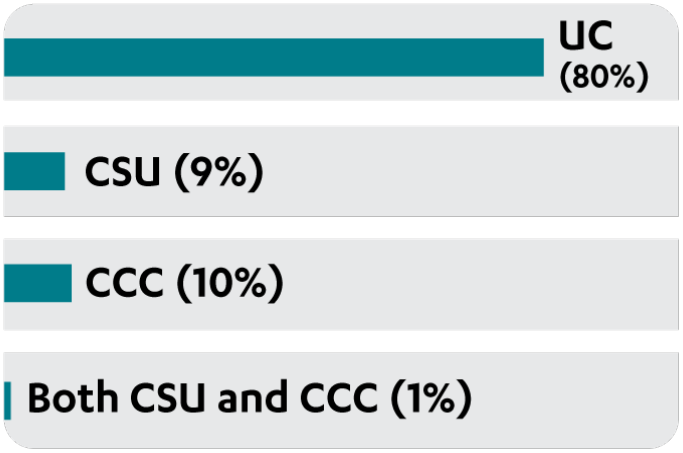


Table A2-A3: School and Work Status

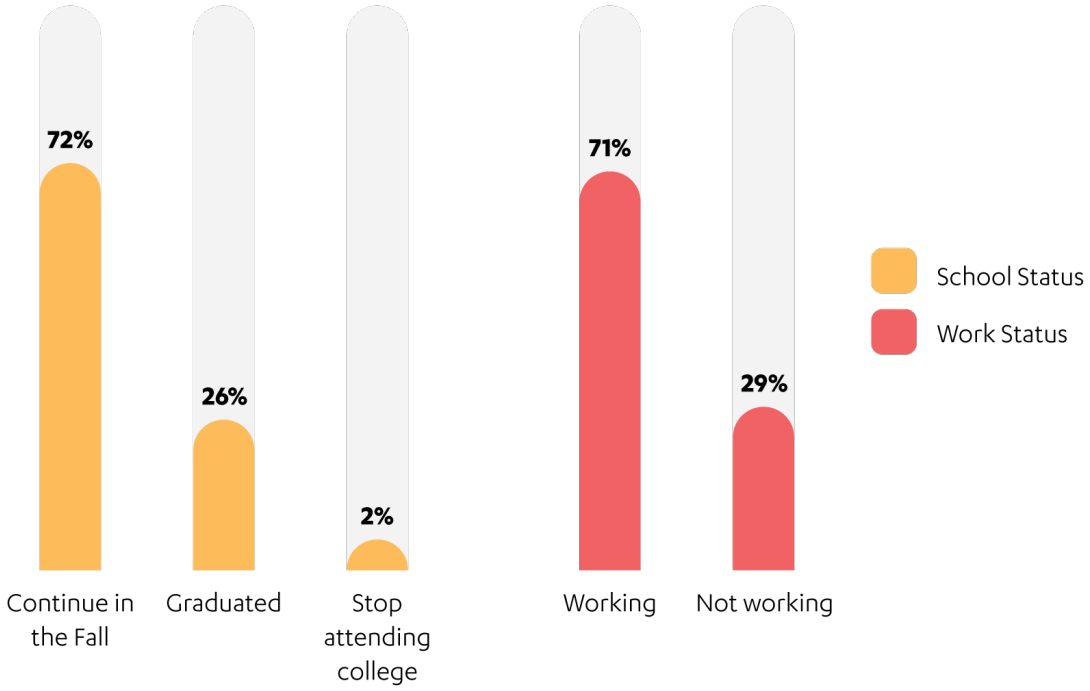


Table A4: College Majors

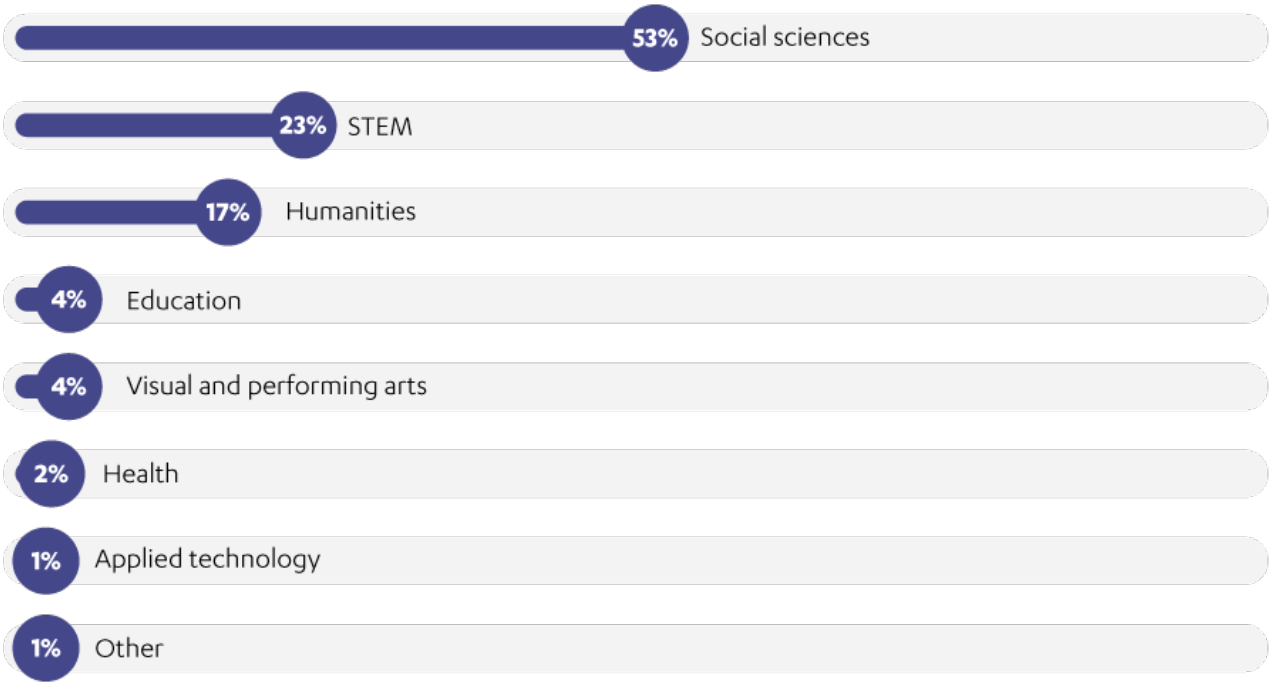


Table A5: Job Industries

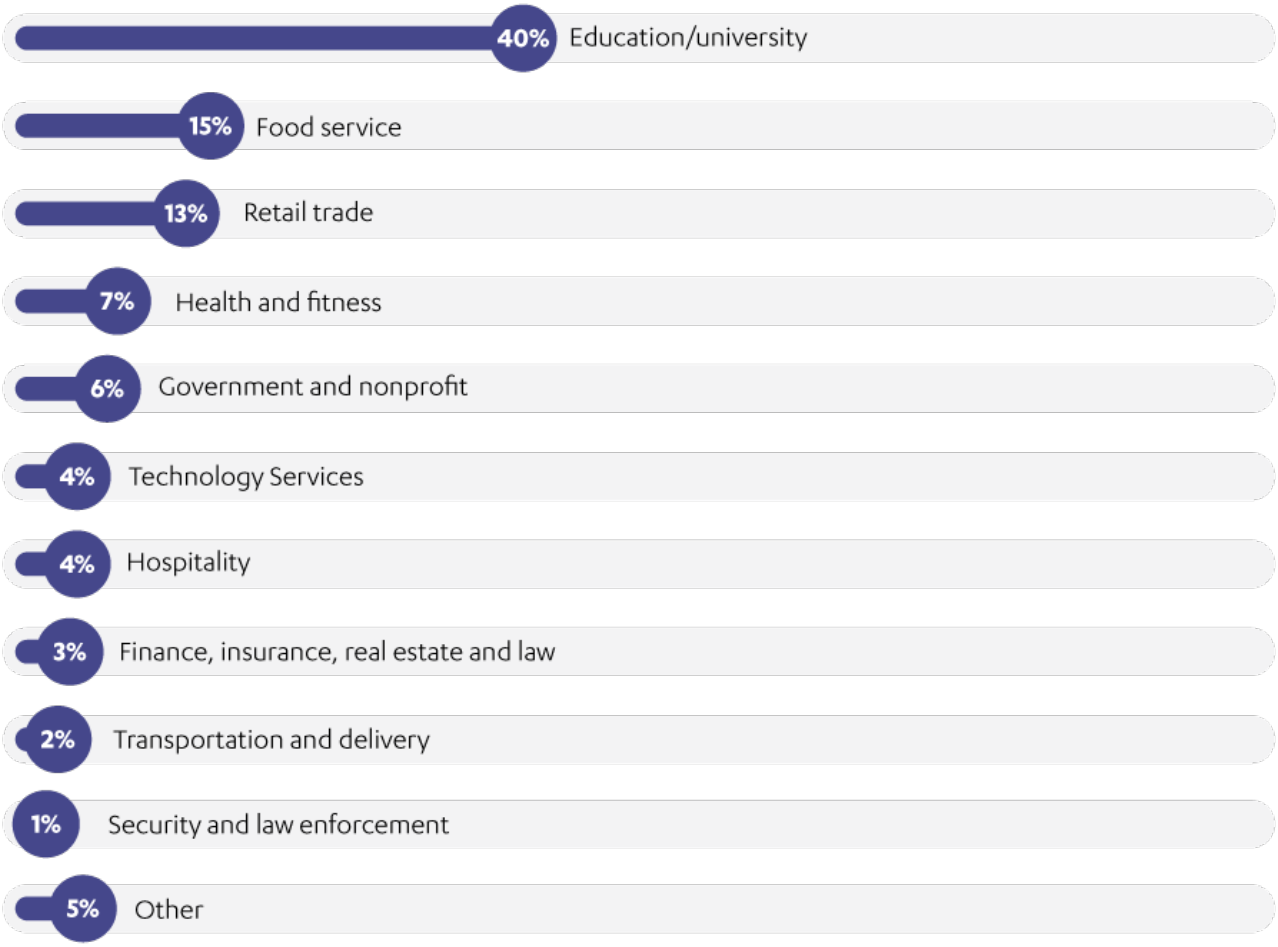


Table A6: Survey Sample Demographics

		%
Age	19–20	22
	21–22	57
	23–24	12
	25–29	9
Gender	Female	64
	Male	28
	Gender non-conforming, genderqueer, or gender questioning	7
	Transgender	1
Race/ ethnicity	Latinx or Hispanic	62
	Asian	26
	White	11
	Black or African American	4
	Multiracial	2
	SWANA (Middle Eastern/Southwest Asian/North African	1
	American Indian or Alaskan Native	1

Appendix B: Acknowledgments

This report was a collective and participatory effort by the Labor Summer Research Program Team 2020. We thank all the students, teachers, and advisers who contributed and worked with tireless commitment on this project. We dedicate the report to the workers and learners of Los Angeles County.

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Notes

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7. Interview by Jaquelin Tafolla, August 20, 2020.

8. Interview by Josephine Lukius, August 20, 2020.

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